

“The Bliss of Compassion”

In the beginning, the old stories say, when the heavens and the earth were in formation, back at the very start of time, a great darkness lay upon the face of the deep, and a mighty wind moved across the emptiness. And a voice said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And the Creator saw that the light was good, shiny, bright and beautiful, radiating through the entire universe.

And so God decided to make some more, first laying down the seas, then building the hills and mountains and forests, and each day filling them with unimaginable creatures: elephants and tigers in the forests of Asia, buffalo on the broad plains of this continent, and birds in numbers that darkened the skies in their annual migrations. And in the depths of the ocean, the coral reefs were formed, home to the sea turtles who fed on the bottom grass.

Each day the Creator labored, the old legends say, and each day the Creator saw that the Earth was good, an excellent habitation. No part of it was superfluous. No species was throw-away or expendable. Every bird and beast and fish added to the maker’s delight. All of it was of superior quality. If a teacher had been giving out grades, God would have received an A+. That’s what the book of Genesis says.

And on the sixth day, God made people, and blessed the whole creation, and gave the people the green growing plants to eat because in the beginning, all beings lived in peace and none preyed upon the others. And then God rested, and blessed it all again because it was such a fantastic world.

And this is what it means to bless and be blessed, to feel an outpouring of wonder and gratitude for life and all existence. Because *bless* is related to the word *bliss*. And to experience a sense of bliss means that we feel deeply, deeply happy just to be alive, just to exist, just to waken to one more day and feel ourselves a part of this stupendous creation.

I think animals can teach us about blessing, about joy. They remind us to be satisfied with what we have and not demand more than we need. Not one is worried about the stock market. Not one wants to run for office or win votes or govern the animal kingdom. None brags that their religion is better than their neighbor’s. Not one torments themselves with unanswerable questions about what lies beyond this world. Each one is happy with just a little piece of the earth, pure water and fresh air, enough room make a nest or burrow or den, to live and roam as nature intends. None needs a passport or travel documents or citizenship papers, because they live in the state of bliss.

Now the old stories say that in the beginningless beginning of things, before history was written, there was a garden, lush and fertile. And into this garden came a man, Adam, and God gave him a living soul, *nefesh chaya* (in the Hebrew). But Adam was lonely. He had no friends, no playmates. And so the Creator made the animals, the cattle and

the wild creatures, and God gave the animals souls as well, *nefesh chaya*, just like the soul given to Adam. So animals were intended to be our companions and soulmates, according to the Bible. Not resources, not commodities, not our possessions, but kindred beings like ourselves, sharing one spirit, part of our larger family.

Which is no myth. We're all related, biologically and emotionally, more deeply than most of us realize. To help you conceive it, imagine for a moment a line of women holding hands. At the front of the line is a little girl holding onto her mother's hand. And the mother is holding her mother's hand, the grandmother of the girl at the front. And the grandmother is holding her mother's hand, in a chain of matrilineal descent, of grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and great-great-greats stretching off into the distance, perhaps running right down this aisle of the sanctuary and out the door. Can you picture that?

Now imagine we have another line facing the first, perhaps in this aisle. And in this second line, we have a young chimpanzee holding her mother's hand. And the chimp mother is holding her mother's hand. So that there's an unbroken line of chimpanzee mothers facing a line of human mothers stretching toward the distant horizon, which is also the distant past.

Think of the two lines stretching out our front door, running south, maybe heading down Route 7, on either side of the street, toward Shelburne and beyond. What scientists tell us is that as those two lines move into the distance, they begin to converge. The lines get closer and closer together. Until at one point not too far from here, around the southern border of our little state, they would come together and there would be just one woman right in the middle joining her right hand to the human line and her left hand to the chimpanzee line. She would be our great-, great-, many times great ancestor who lived about five million years ago, the mother of us all.

So we are related. But at some point in the distant past, we began to think of these two lines as having no connection to each other. The relationship was broken. There was a false separation. So that those in the human line were considered to have legal rights while those in the non-human had no rights. Those in the human line could own private property; those in the non-human line could be bought and sold and traded as property. Those in the human line had a soul; those in the non-human line had no souls.

As the Good Book says, we were expelled from the garden. At that point, animals ceased to be our companions. Other species became ours to own, to hunt or harvest however we wanted. We lost our moral connection to nature. And the Earth suffered. The human grace grew lonely again. We began to torture ourselves with impossible questions not realizing that, as the book of Job says, the birds of the air and fish of the sea were there to teach us and guide us in how to live.

But the Bible also says that we can regain that original blessing we all once enjoyed, regain that sense of harmony and peace where the lion and the ox lie down together and it's bliss just to share the breathe of life.

But how do we get back to the garden? How do we reclaim Eden? At this season of year, when Jews celebrate the New Year, they also celebrate the creation and re-creation of the world. For every dawn is like the very first day. And each moment of existence, the miracle recurs.

So a Hasidic tale relates how one year Rabbi David went to the town of Lublin to spend Rosh Hashanah with the Seer, the great visionary who founded his order. But one New Year's Day, as the service was ready to begin with the blowing of the *shofar* or ram's horn, the Seer looked around and noticed Rabbi David wasn't there. He sent someone to look, who found that Rabbi standing at the front gate of the synagogue, holding out his cap full of barley for the horses, which his driver in his hurry to join in the prayers had left behind untended and unfed. When Rabbi David had finished caring for the horses and came into the House of Prayer, the Seer exclaimed, "That was a fine blowing of the ram's horn Rabbi David treated us to!" He was suggesting that acts of compassion were the best forms of worship, the gateways to joy and peace.

We pray this day, this coming year, to make us kind to the animals, to join in the bliss of the merciful.

Reverend Gary Kowalski is the author of **Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America's Founding Fathers**, published by BlueBridge in 2008. He writes a blog on how the Founders viewed issues affecting faith and public life at <http://revolutionaryspirits.blogspot.com>. His other books include **The Souls of Animals** (New World Library, 2007), **Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom For Anyone Who Has Ever Lost A Pet** (New World Library 2007), **Science and the Search for God** (Lantern Books, 2003) and **The Bible According To Noah: Theology As If Animals Mattered** (Lantern Books, 2001). All are available on [wwwamazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or from your local bookstore.